

Response

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To begin with, a word of gratitude to Rev Thomas for the spirited exhortation to African theologians and educators in general and Nazarenes in particular is in order. The exhortation to African theologians and educators is twofold: to begin writing and publishing theological literature and for those who have already begun without much help and success to not stop writing and speaking. It comes at a most opportune time, as the current century is aptly dubbed the *African Century*. To begin, there are a number of pertinent observations arising from the paper that I would like to turn our attention to. Then I would like to address a few critical remarks on the essay.

The first observation relates to the *spirit* or *tenor* of the essay. Rev Thomas (:1, 2) expresses a concern that this may be misinterpreted. He pleads for “caution and consideration” in addition “The plea is from my heart and I sincerely hope that it would not be construed as presumptuous or arrogant; that is not the intent”. It is a genuine concern for a number of reasons: in communication it is not always what you say that is important but rather how you say what needs to be said without being offensive to anyone and yet influence the very party to whom you address yourself. The nature of his plea is sensitive. He does not want to come across as unappreciative to the role that has been played by missionaries in general and the Church of the Nazarene in America, in particular. This is not to bite the hand that feeds you or has fed you or still needs to feed you in the future. Then another reason why it is important for him to be understood in the correct spirit, and perhaps this is his most important concern, is the unity of the Church. It is accepted that though there may be many different (American, Asian, African, etc.) branches of the Church of the Nazarene, in the end the church is ONE. It is true that the spirit of the essay oscillates between serious and urgent pleas to confrontation. There is (:2) the plea that if and when African theologians and educators are given a chance it will be noticed that they have something valuable to contribute to augment theology. Then there is the almost sarcastic confrontation (:2) of the typical negative perception and viewpoint of an African by the

“uninitiated”. In this case the main culprits have to be Western Europe and Northern America however it is not limited to these geographical areas only. It is sad to say but there are many Africans who have the same mindset of the continent. Rev Thomas is very alert in pointing out that such a mindset is dangerous for the community of the Church and for Africans themselves. It has a debilitating effect and prevents African theologians from believing that the same power of God’s Spirit is operational in them as in any other child of God.

The second observation is the call for *collaboration* or *partnerships* between theologians of different geographical areas in the world. Rev Thomas states, “...I am suggesting that we work proactively and together with our US, English, Australian, Philippine, Korean and European counterparts”. The partnership must not be unequal nor must the approach be active from one side and passive from the other. To put it differently, Africa will have to be clear on what the items on the agenda for discussion must be and to initiate research in those areas using the advantage they have with the brothers and sisters across the world. This is helpful for Africans do not need to pity themselves and wait to be invited to relate the African experience only. Africans can and must host their own conferences such as this one and articulate very eloquently their spiritual insight and knowledge of the things of God Almighty.

The third observation has to do with *self-belief in the work of salvation God wrought*. Africans must not wait for others to say, “Hey I think you have something to contribute,” rather Africans must know that they have something to contribute. The negative stereotype of what an African is should be avoided at all times. It has to be understood that to be African is to be human. There are differences between the peoples of the world. Those differences are facts and facts are not to be ignored. The fact of the matter is that even between Africans from Malawi and Africans from South Africa, for instance, there are serious differences e.g. accent, skin colour, dress, and language. However these are differences on the surface. What is much more important to grasp is that “in Christ” there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free man, male nor female, no alien or stranger but we are all children of the living God. There is only one Lord and Spirit that indwells all of us (Galatians 3:26-29, 4:6-7, Ephesians 2:14-16, 19).¹ After

¹ Scripture reference from the Good News Bible: Today’s English Version

the Apostle Peter arrived at the home of Cornelius (different population group than Peter) to preach the good news of the kingdom, and the latter subsequently repented, the former announced, "...I now realize that it is true that God treats everyone on the same basis. Those who worship him and do what is right are acceptable to him, no matter what race they belong to" (Acts 10:34, 35). Later when Peter was questioned on why the Gentiles also received the Holy Spirit, his response was simple yet forceful, "These people have received the Holy Spirit, just as we also did. Can anyone then stop them from being baptized with water" (Acts 10:47). It will thus appear that as African theologians and educators these are the verses we need to remind ourselves of.

The fourth observation is the sober **reality** of the task at hand. Rev Thomas (:2) states "...admit that we have a long way to becoming what we once were" and also "The baggage we bring along with us is heavy". In this sentence he not only refers to the daunting task at hand but also supplies an example of Africa's former glory in Ethiopia and Egypt. Rev Thomas gives the example through design with the anticipation that it will serve as a stimulus for the task at hand. The task is also made more difficult when it is considered that Africa lacks the necessary infrastructure, financial, logistical, and technological resources. This is where the assistance of the world family of Nazarenes becomes pivotal.

The fifth observation is a **warning** or a **threat**. The choice for theologians and educators of the Church of the Nazarene in Africa is a simple one: to be heard or not to be heard with the resultant loss of not "augmenting theology" and an African church that is "irrelevant". Rev Thomas states "The African bulls of the Church of the Nazarene dare not stop bellowing because if we do, hope in our contribution to the theology of Holiness will slowly fade". In view of the consequences being so severe for the African church the unparalleled selection for African theologians and educators is "...to raise your voices and bellow..." or "let us bellow anyway" or still "Bellow for all you're worth".

The sixth observation is when Rev Thomas helps us to understand **how** theology and education is done in Africa. He states that the starting point has to be where you are in your given history. This is theology in context – Africa. The world and all the phenomena including Scripture must be looked at "**uniquely**" from and through African eyes.

After having observed what is most obvious to many of us allow me to share some critical comments. It is assumed that no response will be accurate without some critical comment. Let me not be a disappointment.

In speaking about the great blessing of new technology like computers, emails and the Internet, the unequal distribution of such technology across the world has to be noted. It has to be noted that of all the other continents Africa is lagging far behind. There are very few African countries where the new technology is readily available. Though we refer to the new technology as common it has to be borne in mind “common for whom?” Also, if the new technology is as advantageous as it is predicted, then it means that Africa may suffer as a result of this. It may mean that information may not be readily available to certain parts of Africa, thus information is not mutually shared. It may also mean that the “easy communication” may well be not so easy after all and the loss of the “uniform level of instruction”. The new technology may only further exacerbate the already high levels of inequality in African States and between African States. In doing theology it will appear that Africa must not forget its developmental strength.

The above comment leads me to the next comment and that is Africans must take responsibility for the “images” people of the rest of the world have of Africa. The images of civil wars, poverty, malnutrition, bad governance, coup de tats, and donkeys as the modes of transport are a fact. The major reason why they exist is because Africans themselves provided them. The images, it has to be admitted, are not entirely fair and balanced. To be African has to do with a lot more than the above images. Admitting mistakes of the past is African and part of the recovery and discovery of what it is to be an African theologian or educator. Africans are not asking for pity or sympathy but rather for understanding and acceptance as fellow and equal colleagues in doing theology and education.

It is at times not clear if Rev Thomas only refers to doing theology or does he include the socio-political, economic, and developmental challenges facing Africa. The reference (:2) to NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa’s Development), which is the African Union’s policy instrument, is a case in point. This will indicate a role much larger than merely doing theology.

There is a presumption that the African theological articulation by Africans will be considered not worth listening to. It is not clear what informs this

presupposition. The reader is left guessing. Is it merely because it is African or because it is from Africa that it is summarily dismissed? It is not clear. It is also not clear who will be dismissive of Africa's worthwhile contribution towards the development of holiness theology. The guilty party/parties is/are not mentioned in particular. Again the reader is left to infer.

Factors of poverty, HIV/AIDS, and hunger are not uniquely confined to the African Continent. It may well be that it is more severe in Africa but it is not unique to Africa. These socio-political and economic ills are not rightfully Africa's ills. They are not a blessing but rather social ills that must be eradicated. It is right that Africans themselves must articulate how they view hunger as Christians. In doing so Africans must not isolate or distance themselves in the process from the very audience it seeks understanding from. I know it is not the intention of Rev Thomas to do so but caution is necessary nonetheless.

Rev Thomas does not tell us who can do theology in Africa. I surmise that he took for granted the reader knows. The fact is that when an ordinary person thinks of theology then immediately he/she thinks that is for the theological seminary or the university professor to do. Is it the domain for the chosen few or can anyone do theology? The reader is left guessing.

Finally bellowing must be distinguished from quality or content. It is necessary to bellow but noise must not become a substitute for good quality holiness theology and education. The bellowing is welcome but it must be of decent quality.

On the whole the plea of Rev Thomas for African theologians and educators to take up the pen and start writing and for those who are already doing so to continue is a much needed invitation and exhortation. Taking the position of Rev Thomas into consideration, Principal of Nazarene Theological College in South Africa makes the call so much more worthwhile. God has indeed blessed our local churches in particular with pastors and lay-people alike with the inbred ability to do theology, in practice. The greatest advantage of this paper by Rev Thomas is that he shows us that we can do theology not because of our problems but in spite of the challenges and problems we face as a Continent – the Continent of Africa. It is now the time to “bellow for all you're worth”. God bless Africa.